

## CONTINUING YOUR EDUCATION ON YOUR OWN

Michael Dalrymple, an attorney practicing in Indianapolis, obtained a bachelor's degree from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, and a law degree from Indiana University, Bloomington. He contributed the following article regarding his own experiences as a student with blindness.

For thousands of students every year, the decision whether to go to college, and if so, which college or university to attend, is a daunting process. Will you be happy? Will you find a course of study that is challenging and exciting? Will you be able to make all new friends? Will you be prepared for whatever comes after college? These are all important questions and ones every student must attempt to answer. I did my best to answer these questions, but as with other students with disabilities, I had to answer a different and unique series of questions. Will I be able to obtain appropriate materials? Is the campus accessible? Will my professors be willing to accommodate my needs? Who will I turn to when things are not working? Compounding the difficulty of these questions is the simple fact that my friends without disabilities were not asking about or even concerned with these issues. For the first time, I had to face the fact that I would not enjoy the protections of the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and the comforting presence of a resource room or a special education teacher. As much as we wish our high school special education programs would improve, they are by far the most comprehensive and supportive network that individuals with disabilities will ever have. So, how do students with disabilities manage the transition from high school to college? I certainly do not claim to have the answers, but I will share my experience and lessons.

I will not address the admissions process, as having a disability should not impact a student's ability to gain entrance to any level of higher education. If a student satisfies the institution's requirements, he or she will have just as good, if not a better chance, to be admitted. I will start with choosing from a list of colleges or universities to which the student has been admitted or is expected to gain admittance. Almost every institution offers an interview process. It is not always required, but I think it is crucial for a student with a disability to participate. First, it gets the student on campus and introduces the student to administrative personnel and hopefully faculty. No matter how much you read about a place, you will never know the feel of it until you visit. Remember that marketing professionals write the brochures, but the student must spend four years or so at the school, not its glossy description. Visit the campus as much as possible and meet as many people as possible.

The school will also have a person or department in charge of disability services. Large universities will have well-developed services and programs. Smaller schools may have a single person responsible for providing services. I experienced both and I can in all honesty say that neither is perfect, but both provide unique advantages. The student must discern what he or she is comfortable with, and what arrangement can provide needed services.

As a totally blind student, I needed access to printed text. In 1991, the development of electronic formats was in its infancy. I relied upon Braille or others reading to me. In high school, all of my textbooks were provided in Braille. This was impossible in college. First, the volume of material covered in college courses is much greater. Secondly, college professors often discover a recently published book that is of interest to them. It may be placed on the reading list a week before classes start or even halfway through the semester. These materials cannot be translated into Braille, large print, or onto cassette in time. Thus, the only alternative was to have someone read me the text. Students on work study often read my texts not available in alternative formats. Now, computers with scanners and translation programs allow the individual to do the reading without assistance.

My experience in college translates directly to other needs. Even with the best computers, I still cannot peruse a library without help. No matter how independent or successful, individuals with disabilities will find themselves, from time to time, depending on others for assistance. This is when students will need a supportive office of disability services. So, ask what services are provided and ask how a student obtains the services. Ask who is the contact and how often that person is available. Ask if someone is available at 10:00 at night, when some emergency service is required. You will receive many

different answers. Most importantly, students must be confident that services will be provided when needed. A level of confidence cannot be achieved by reading materials alone; rather, students must meet in person with the director of disability services, with the personal contact, or with the person providing the services.

I was sold when my college of choice told me that they did not know what I needed, had little or no experience with educating a blind student, but would do what was required to allow me to be successful. This contrasted with other schools, where their extensive array of services were touted as the best around. I trusted the promise of services over the demonstration of existing services. Again, neither is wrong. Each student must find that level of comfort and it can only be found by personal contact. The vast majority of students can matriculate through college, especially large universities, without knowing faculty or the administration. It is highly unlikely that a student with a disability will have that same experience. Fortunately, the increased contact with administration and faculty should prove to be a great benefit to a student's overall educational experience and future prospects in the job market. My first suggestion then is to meet in person with as many people as possible and openly discuss your needs.

My second point is brief but critical to a student's success at the college level. Starting with day one at college, no one is responsible for the provision of specialized services except for the student. There are no resource teachers or vice principals to talk to professors. If a particular professor is being uncooperative or even discriminatory, the administration will likely be very concerned and supportive; however, the student must manage service delivery, speak up when services are not provided, and be his or her own advocate when things are not going well. Students often struggle during the first semester, because they expect someone to address deficiencies in service. In most situations, this will not happen.

Please do not misunderstand my point here. I found faculty, administrators, and support personnel to be incredibly helpful and attentive. The difference between high school and college is that no one is assigned to ask if things are going well. No one follows a student with a disability to ensure that student workers show up and perform their work appropriately. Students must be willing to speak up for themselves, and able to communicate needs in a productive and beneficial manner. Unfortunately, this is a skill that is not often addressed in high school, but is necessary during college and throughout their adult lives. Parents must rest assured that students will quickly develop this skill with a little practice out of necessity.

Both parents and students are often so concerned over the provision of specific services that the foundation of a successful relationship with the college or university is overlooked. If a student takes the time to establish that relationship through visits and conversation, the provision of appropriate services will follow. Without doubt, there will be shortfalls or specific issues in the delivery of services. The well-prepared student will be able to count on the relationship established with the college or university and exercise developing advocacy skills to address his or her needs. This combination will serve the student well during college and during his or her next transition into the workplace.

